

How to Grow a Knowledge Sharing Culture

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How to grow a **knowledge sharing** culture – a culture where people expect to share their knowledge with others and willingly ask others for help when they need it. In other words, a culture of **generalized reciprocity** – that wonderful term that means we help another without expecting a direct return from that person, but with confidence that others will help us when we have the need.

If you are a startup- you probably had that culture from the beginning. The really difficult question is how to turn a culture around when the existing norm is, “I’m too busy looking out for myself to worry about others”

I can start to answer that question by saying what doesn’t work; mandating sharing, relying on slogans, ~~brining~~ rewarding employees with points or dollars for sharing, a performance review that says you must have X number of posts or contributions. I get asked the culture question a lot by managers that have already tried and failed with all of the above.

The answer is found in the term “grow.” What is being grown is an internalized belief, “that we are all better off if we help each other.” The way people come to that belief is to experience it. A cultural grows over time- so the necessary action is to continually create opportunities where organizational members can experience a culture where they are better off because they are all helping each other.

The simplest way to do that is that every time there is a meeting, conference, retreat, or even a dinner, take the opportunity to hold a brief knowledge sharing exchange. It can be as simple as going around the table



at the beginning of a meeting and asking each person to spend two minutes saying what they need help with, or talking about something new they think might be of use to others. Call it “Gives and Takes.” Or use one of my favorite ways, **speed consulting**, or a round of **story circles**, or **reciprocity circles**.

The knowledge sharing can take as little as 15 minutes or if it is a daylong meeting it would be worth spending an hour. But for whatever

time period, everybody in the room is in a temporary culture where they are

learning with and from each other. I'm not talking icebreakers, I'm talking about creating a design where people get real help on an issue that is important to them. Maybe they don't learn all they need to know in that brief period, but the offer is made and accepted.

We only learn how to function within any culture by experiencing it. You can read a description about the culture of China or Costa Rico, but to understand it you have to be in it. So in an organization, take every opportunity that presents itself to have everybody in the room experience getting help from others. When that kind of experience occurs, people begin to think to themselves, "Hey these people are a lot like me, same issues, same concerns," or "I'm going to buy that guy a cup of coffee so I can find out more about what how he is doing that."

Creating the experience one time isn't nearly enough – but if you continually put people in a temporary culture of knowledge sharing, the culture will change!